Majuli River Island as a World Heritage Site

*284. SHRI PRAFULL GORADIA: Will the Minister of ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government are considering to take up with UNESCO the proposal to include Majuli, the biggest river island in the world, to be designated as a world heritage site and

(b) if so, what preparatory steps have been taken in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT AND FORESTS (SHRI T.R. BAALU): (a) Yes, Sir.

(b) It has been agreed in principle to nominate Majuli River Island in Assam as a World Heritage Site under the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) World Heritage Convention. The Department of Culture has requested the State Government of Assam to fill in the Preparatory Assistance forms and send them to the Ministry of Environment and Forests for recommending the grant of Preparatory Assistance to the World Heritage Committee, UNESCO, Paris.

SHRI PRAFULL GORADIA: Mr. Chairman, Sir, is it true, and would the hon. Minister throw some light on the reports that there is enormous pressure of infiltration from Bangladesh on this beautiful island, *i.e.* Majuli, which is supposed to be the largest river island in the world? If there is this pressure of infiltrators, then is there any panic amongst the caretakers of the Vaishnav Monastries or Satras as they are called? In the event they get panicky and leave the place for better shelter somewhere, then, what would be the fate of the manuscripts and the artefacts that the island is so rich with?

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Sir, the hon. Member's question does not belong to my Ministry. It will be passed on to the Home Ministry. Sir, I deal with natural heritage only. As far as the cultural heritage is concerned, it is dealt with...

MR. CHAIRMAN: That is right. It does not arise out of it.

SHRI PRAFULL GORADIA: Sir, my second supplementary is, the island is seasonally threatened with floods, and as a result, there is also erosion. Is there any proposal, in order to protect the

invaluable manuscripts and artefacts, to build some kind of *pucca* museums in which these treasures can be stored safely?

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Sir, at Majuli Island, there is the confluence of the river Subhansri and the river Brahmaputra. In the south side of Majuli, due to the pressure of the Brahmaputra river, erosion occurs. During the monsoon, the entire area is inundated for many days with two to four metre-deep waters. Here I agree with the hon. Member. After submitting the application to UNESCO, as and when we get the assistance, definitely, it will be taken care of.

SHRI DRUPAD BORGOHAIN: Mr. Chairman, Sir, I join in agreeing, in principle, to nominate Majuli River Island of Assam as a World Heritage Site under the UNESCO's World Heritage Convention. This is one point. Sir, Majuli is the biggest river island of the country as it was formed due to siltation of the Brahmaputra. So, some instability in certain part of the island is there. Therefore, protection of this natural island is the first priority.

Secondly, Majuli is one of the classical, cultural and religious centres of Assam. The protection of this island is of great significance, *i.e.* preserving the Assamese culture and identity. I would like to know from the Minister whether his Ministry has considered all these points, and whether the Ministry has given much importance to the physical and environmental protection of this island. I would further like to know as to how the Ministry proposes to arrange the huge funds which are needed for this purpose, as it is also related to harnessing of the Brahmaputra.

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Mr. Chairman, Sir, Majuli is the biggest river island in the world and it has got unique values of ecology as well as environment. It also has got a rich bio-diversity as far as flora and fauna are concerned. As far as the religious values are concerned, Majuli is world famous for its Satraj culture, a traditional seat of Vaishnava religion. A great sage, Sankaradeva, in the 5th Century, spread the message of universal love and care for the people of Majuli island. The people there live in peace and harmony with the nature. A big temple-type religious architectural monument is existing there since the 5th Century. The cultural values will be considered by the Archaeological Survey of India for its inclusion in the list of World Heritage Centres. As far as the national heritage is concerned,

the culture and heritage of Satraj will be considered and definitely, the suggestions given by Member will be taken care of.

DR. ARUN KUMAR SARMA: Mr. Chairman, Sir, I thank the Government for its decision to nominate Majuli island as a World Heritage Site. In this connection, I want to draw the attention of the hon. Minister to a certain news item which was published in the 'Indian Express' recently saying that the Archaeological Survey of India had submitted eleven proposals and except the Darjeeling Railway Project, none of those proposals was accepted by the UNESCO for consideration as a World Heritage Site.

I would like to know whether the Minister has examined as to on what grounds those proposals were rejected so that, with regard to Majuli island, we can go ahead with a well prepared document so that this project gets due attention from the UNESCO.

Secondly, Sir, to another question, the Culture Minister replied to me, in the last week, that if the Environment Ministry gives clearance, the Culture Department would take steps in order to preserve the cultural heritage, the manuscripts of Satraj and other forms of cultural bio-diversity of that area. I would like to know from the hon. Minister whether concrete proposals to preserve the culture and bio-diversity will be drawn up by the Ministry.

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Mr. Chairman, Sir, as far as my Ministry is concerned, five natural sites have been identified and they have already been registered with the UNESCO. They are Kailadev Ghana National Park, Rajasthan; Manas National Park, Assam; Kaziranga National Park, Assam; Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, West Bengal; and Nandadevi National Park. As far as cultural heritage centres are concerned, it is the domain of the other Minister. I request the hon. Member to put this question separately to him.

SHRI MD. SALIM: Sir, it is a heritage not only in terms of flora and fauna and naturally built island, but also in terms of its culture. A typical experimentation has been done in a natural way there. People from several parts of Assam migrated and settled down in that island. So, though it does not come under your Ministry alone—as you are only concerned with flora and fauna and natural things — will you take the State Government, the Culture Department of the

Human Resources Development Ministry and Tourism Ministry into confidence to evolve a policy not only to preserve and protect but also to attract tourists from abroad, as well as rehabilitating the population already staying there. Since you have already mooted the idea of trying to get it declared as a UNESCO Heritage Site, naturally I would like to know whether you have taken into consideration the question of proper rehabilitation of the people staying over there.

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Sir, the Majuli Island has a poulation of 1.3 lakh and knowing fully well about the rich cultural as well as natural heritage, a Committee headed by Shri S.K. Das was sent there for a site-study. They have given their report which clearly reveals that the value of the Majuli Island is mainly in its cultural heritage component, particularly the evolution of the Vaishanav religion, art and culture. As regards the natural value, with the distinctive features of natural beauty and aesthetic importance, it is the largest river island in the world. There is, however, no mention of any endemic species of flora and fauna to establish distinctive endemic natural value. So, my point of view is that the voluntary relocation should be funded and an action plan may be prepared in this regard.

SHRI KULDIP NAYYAR: Sir, I want to know whether this island is going to be properly defended against the activities of the ULFA because sometime back a very leading human rights activist was murdered there and till today there is no trace of that.

SHRI T.R. BAALU: Sir, the question does not fall within the domain of my Ministry. This question pertains to the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Funds for Quilon-Tirunelveli-Thruchendur and Tenkasi-Virudhunagar rail lines

*285. SHRI P. SOUNDARARAJAN: Will the Minister of RAILWAYS be pleased to state:

(a) what is the estimated cost of Quilon-Tirunelveli-Tiruchendur-Tenkasi-Virudhunagar rail lines;

(b) how much amount has been sanctioned so far;